

Burleson Elementary Earns State Recognition for Double-Digit Gains on State Reading Test

Hartselle City Schools –
F.E. Burleson Elementary
Hartselle, AL

District Statistics

Number of Schools: 6

Number of Students: 3,064

Grades: K-12

Website:

<http://www.hartselletigers.org>

Student Population:

4% African-American

<1% Asian

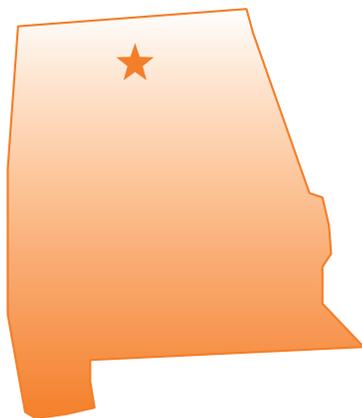
90% Caucasian

3% Hispanic

2% Two or more races

30% economically disadvantaged

11% special education



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Challenge

- Achievement gap between special education and general education students

Solution

- Fast ForWord®

Population Served:

- Special Education

Results:

- Increase in the percentage of students performing at the proficient level or above in reading on the ACT Aspire from 2014 to 2015:
 - Grade 3 – Increase of 22 percentage points
 - Grade 4 – Increase of 26 percentage points
- CLAS Banner School Award 2015

When the state of Alabama enacted tougher standards for all students, Hartselle City Schools (HCS) formed a reading task force for students with special needs. The district, which is located about 10 miles south of Decatur, began looking for a new intervention program and decided to give the neuroscience-based Fast ForWord program a try. F.E. Burleson Elementary, one of two Title I schools in HCS, was the first to sign up for the pilot.

“We had been using a reading intervention program with our struggling students and we could see some improvements, but we felt like we were missing something,” said Tara Hamlett, a special education teacher and psychometrist. “We wanted to help bridge the achievement gap between our students with special needs and our general education students, so we wanted to try something different.”

Achieving fast and lasting gains

Burleson Elementary began using the Fast ForWord program during the 2014-15 school year with students with disabilities.

“We saw a 25 percent increase in students’ reading abilities in one semester. We were stunned with the results! We expected to see improvements on the Reading Progress Indicator



(RPI) assessment, but we didn't expect that large of a gain so quickly," said Hamlett. "We also saw improvement in students' ACT Aspire scores."

After seeing the results at Burleson, another school in the system — Crestline Elementary — added the Fast ForWord program in 2015. Students at Crestline also showed increases in reading on the RPI assessment.

Now, all six schools in HCS implement the Fast ForWord program. Students with special needs work on the online program 30 minutes a day, three to five days a week.

Addressing the root cause of students' difficulties

The Fast ForWord program helps students improve their language and reading skills by addressing the underlying foundational difficulties that keep them from making progress in school. It starts with cognitive skills like memory, attention and processing speed and works from the bottom up, using the principles of neuroplasticity. Students who use the program can make fast progress, increasing their reading skill level up to two years in as little as three months. They continue to make progress long after finishing the program.

"Our goals with the Fast ForWord program are to continue to help our students develop their memory, attention, processing and sequencing skills. As a psychometrist, I test a lot of children who have poor working memory skills, which directly affects their ability to learn to read. What's unique about Fast ForWord is that it helps build the foundational skills children need to become successful readers. It builds those connections in the brain that we simply weren't seeing with our previous reading program. Because of the results we've seen, we now try to get as many students on the program as we can," said Hamlett.

"We had one little boy who was reading only 13 words per minute at the beginning of second grade," she continued. "We put him on the Fast ForWord program and by the end of the school year, he was reading 79 words per minute. The only difference between first and second grade was Fast ForWord. It made such a difference with him."

Earning statewide recognition for ACT Aspire gains

In 2015, while many schools struggled with Alabama's new standards, Burleson Elementary had gains on every benchmark and made the most improvement among schools in the Decatur area. On the ACT Aspire, which includes students with special needs, Burleson third-graders had a 22-point improvement in the percent of proficient readers and fourth-graders showed a 26-point gain.

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F.E. Burleson Elementary
ACT Aspire – Reading
Percent of students in each achievement level

Grade 3

	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
All Students 2014-15	25.71	20.00	25.71	28.57
All Students 2013-14	41.33	26.67	20.00	12.00

Grade 4

	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
All Students 2014-15	19.18	21.92	32.88	26.03
All Students 2013-14	25.00	42.19	15.63	17.19

Level I - Does Not Meet Academic Content Standards.

Level II - Partially Meets Academic Content Standards.

Level III - Meets Academic Content Standards.

Level IV - Exceeds Academic Content Standards.

As a result of students' gains, the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools (CLAS) selected Burleson Elementary to be one of 14 CLAS Banner Schools for 2015. The CLAS Banner School Award program recognizes schools that provide outstanding services for students and serve as models for other schools. To earn the award, teachers and administrators have to show how their methods are improving students' academic performance.

"The Fast ForWord program was one of the things we did differently from 2014 to 2015," said Hamlett. "It's helping students improve their cognitive skills and retrain how their brains read, which is improving their performance."

Seeing is believing

"The Fast ForWord program has made such a difference with our students that you have to see it to believe it," said Hamlett. "Seeing the effort students are putting into the program and how much they're improving just warms our hearts. It's also helping our teachers because students are now ready for their instruction. We're very pleased with the results."

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